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NEWS

Health claims, criticisms surround new cigarettes
Ryan Robinson

Excuse me, do you have a light -- for a cigarette without nicotine?

Vector Tobacco acknowledges that there is no such thing as a safe cigarette. But the company says it has developed a cigarette without the addictive agent and the most potent and abundant cancer-causing toxins in tobacco.

So is it really less harmful than regular cigarettes? Will it help some smokers quit, as Vector claims?

A Vector spokeswoman calls the product "one of the biggest things to hit the (tobacco) industry."

Some market analysts extinguish that as hype and argue that smokers won't buy cigarettes without nicotine.

And Vector can't make any health claims on its cigarette packaging until the U.S. Food and Drug Administration tests the product.

Here's what the New Era has learned about the new product, to be made from special tobacco grown in Lancaster County starting this summer.

The no-nicotine process was developed by Dr. Mark A. Conkling, vice president of genetic research at Vector Tobacco and a former North Carolina State University genetics professor.

Conkling started working with Burley 21 variety tobacco plants grown in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1960s and early 1970s because their nicotine level varied from plant to plant.

Conkling eventually made a modified strand of Burley 21. It was

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called VT (for Vector Tobacco) Burley.

"Some Mennonites here grew a type of burley here for two years around 1995," said Larry Weaver, a local agent for Vector. "It performed real well but they couldn't continue to grow it because of quotas. Those farmers were some of the first ones who signed up for Vector."

The genetically modified seed produces a plant that Vector says prevents virtually all the nicotine in its roots from proceeding up the plant to its leaves.

Vector says cigarettes produced from the nicotine-free tobacco leaf are also virtually free of tobacco-specific nitrosamines or TSNAs, a potent carcinogen found in tobacco.

TSNAs are chemical compounds produced during the tobacco curing process, when the nicotine in the leaf reacts with nitrous oxides present in combustion gases.

Since its tobacco leaves have virtually no nicotine, Vector says it has virtually eliminated the formation of the TSNAs.

A separate development by Vector significantly reduces the most severe cancer-causing agent in cigarettes, the company says. The agent is called carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon carbons or PAHs.

The company plans to produce two brands of cigarettes, called Omni and Omni Free.

Subject to independent laboratory verification, Vector hopes to have Omni cigarettes on the market in 2001. Omnis will have reduced PAHs, but will still contain nicotine and TSNAs.

Omni Free would combine the two technologies, Vector spokeswoman Brandy Bergman said, to create a cigarette with reduced PAHs and virtually no TSNAs or nicotine. The company hopes to put Omni Free on the market in 2002.

"We are extremely excited about these breakthroughs," said Bennett S. YeBow, chairman and chief executive officer of Vector Group. "While there is no such thing as a safe cigarette, we believe we've

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eliminated what the health community considers to be the most serious cancer-causing agents with these developments."

Neither brand Omni nor Omni Free will be a low-tar or "light" cigarette, Bergman said, though Vector is considering adding brands with those designations in the future.

Bergman said the company's tests have shown that the cigarettes can help some people wean themselves from smoking.

"Three out of five said in an extended trial that they smoked fewer cigarettes or were near quitting after seven weeks," Bergman said. "We want to be able to market the cigarettes as a smoking-cessation device."

Jed E. Rose, who heads the Nicotine Research Program at Duke University and is co-inventor of the nicotine patch, has conducted smoking-cessation studies with the new Vector cigarettes for over a year. Liggett Group Inc., a sister company of Vector Tobacco, has been funding the experiments.

He said that about half the participants in his study were able to switch from their regular cigarettes to Vector's very low-nicotine smokes, and that some kept using the cigarettes for the entire 12-week duration of the study.

Some critics say that, generally, "safer" cigarettes and cessation aids such as nicotine patches, gum and antidepressants do not necessarily deliver on their safety promises.

They have not been proven to be effective in reducing harm, Dr. Stuart Bondurant, a professor of medicine at the University of North Carolina who chaired a committee appointed to advise the government, told a news conference in February.

More studies are needed to determine whether smoking-cessation devices reduce the toxins smokers take in or encourage them to smoke more because it seems less dangerous, the committee concluded.

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

NAMED PERSON: CONKLING, MARK A; BERGMAN, BRANDY